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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of formal mentoring programs for high-risk undergraduate students was examined. Formal mentoring is defined as a deliberate matching of university personnel with high-risk students, a group which may include people of color, women, low-income persons, the physically challenged, and first-generation college students. Formal mentoring has evolved to promote students' emotional, environmental, and academic acculturation into the college environment. In this study interviews were conducted with 20 students who had been involved with student support services, Veterans Upward Bound, and the educational opportunity center at a southern, comprehensive, four-year, regional university. The study notes that students reported they felt an obligation to continue their education as a result of the deep commitment of support personnel and the benefits of counseling, tutoring, and institutional guidance, and found that formal mentoring appeared to positively affect student participation, retention, and success in college. Little support was found to substantiate matching mentors and mentees by race or gender. Although traditional mentoring is conceived of as a one-on-one experience, the high-risk students benefited from all components of mentoring provided by a network of mentors. (Contains 17 references.) (SW)

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Clearing a Path for Success: Deconstructing Borders in Higher Education Through Undergraduate Mentoring

November 7, 1997

Presented at the Annual Conference of the

Association for the Study of Higher Education

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This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held in Albuquerque, New Mexico, November 6-9, 1997. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

Clearing a Path for Success: Deconstructing Borders in Higher Education Through Undergraduate Mentoring

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -- I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference. -- Robert Frost

Our purpose in this research is to examine the effectiveness of higher education formal mentoring programs for high risk undergraduate students. The formal mentoring programs that we address in this study are among many programs that serve high risk students. Formal institutional mentoring is the deliberate matching of university personnel with high risk students. The title, "Clearing a Path for Success," alludes to our desired outcome, which is to provide evidence that formal mentoring programs can support students in their quest to obtain a higher education.

In this paper, our intentions are twofold:

1. We want to study mentoring because little information has been published regarding formal undergraduate mentoring programs or their success. Also, we were high risk students of higher education and believe mentoring would have made a difference in our collegiate experiences and that it has the potential to make a difference for others.
2. Most importantly, we want our work to be praxis-oriented in that we hope to "unite theory with practice in a manner that is emancipatory and transformative" (Tierney and Rhoads, 1993, p. 325).

To accomplish our goals in this work, we first discuss postmodern and critical theory as they relate to this study. From postmodern and critical thought as well as other scholarly work, we create a definition of high risk students. Next, we address our assumptions to the importance that mentoring can have on those students. Finally, using qualitative interview data, we illustrate the

importance of the formal mentoring of high risk undergraduate students as perceived by those students.

Postmodern and Critical Theory

In this study, we draw from both postmodern and critical thought. These theoretical frameworks, as related to our study, draw attention to: (a) the emphasis on the marginalization of societal groups and individuals, (b) the role of culture and power, and (c) the goal of emancipatory action (Tierney and Rhoads, 1993). In higher education, postmodern and critical thought can help us understand the implications that socially constructed power relations can have on participation, success, and retention of students as they relate to their social identification.

As postmodernism and critical theory suggest, our society consists of hierarchies that place the dominant group in power and marginalizes or delegitimates to social borders the norms and values of cultures with limited power. Giroux (1993) promotes a "border crossing" agenda that invites teachers, students, and cultural workers to critique, then challenge and oppose institutions, the knowledge claims of disciplines, and the social relationships that dominate our society. Bloland (1995) asserts that an emphasis upon the other, the marginal, or the outsider needs to be kept in the foreground in higher education. Our study encompasses the higher education "other" through formal mentoring, which unlike informal mentoring, is a deliberate matching of university personnel with high risk students.

<u>High Risk Student Characteristics and Experiences</u>

In higher education, several scholars have identified high risk students. Washington (1996) states that minority students, i.e., high risk, are students whose race, gender, ethnic status and/or physical condition have rendered their historical presence in institutions of higher

education a minor one based on their status in American society. Other higher education researchers (Tinto, 1989; Astin, 1982), have posited that there are predictors (parental education, individual motivation, age of student, and socioeconomic status) that characterize students' abilities to attend and/or persist in higher education. Tierney's (1996) study of the college experience of Native Americans utilized Tinto's model of social integration which postulates that most student departures are voluntary in character due to the student's inability to be successfully integrated into the collegiate environment. The implications of Tinto's research are that if a student's parents did not attend college, if a student is not motivated, or is of a non-traditional age, then it is less likely the student will attend and persist in postsecondary education due primarily to his/her inability to socially integrate into the collegiate environment.

Furthermore, Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn, and Pascarella (1996) assert, in a study of 2,666 students from four-year institutions, that institutional experiences, academic achievement, and environmental pull factors are the greatest contributors to persistence decisions. In addition, they found that, for women, the most significant positive effect on college persistence came from mentoring experiences with faculty.

We believe that high risk students generally are: people of color, women, persons from low socio-economic backgrounds, the physically challenged, first-generation college students and others who exist in the margins of society. We hesisitate in listing these categories because possession of one or more of these traits does not necessarily relegate a student to the category of high risk. However, many high risk students who "take the road less traveled" and attend college, have been unsuccessful, compared to other students, due to such factors as: financial difficulties, lack of role models, low institutional expectations, and hostile/non-supportive social environments. As a tool for social integration and counteraction of the constraints on higher

education high risk students, formal mentoring has evolved to promote emotional, environmental, and academic acculturation into these environments.

Informal and Formal Mentoring

Having identified high risk students and their experiences, we now focus on mentoring because we believe and researchers have asserted that it is one of the most powerful tools in support of "high risk" student success regarding participation and retention in institutions of higher education. We further believe that formal mentoring can reduce the negative impact of barriers to successful college completion by facilitating a relationship for the high risk student with someone who is experienced in navigating unfamiliar territory.

The term mentoring is derived from Homer's character Mentor, who was Athena, the goddess of wisdom and skill, who came to earth in the form of a man. Odysseus asked Mentor to care for and nurture his son and to help him become a powerful leader. Mentor was charged with directing every facet of the son's life: physical, intellectual, spiritual, and social development (Clawson, 1980). From this first mentor, a definition for mentoring evolved as the development of a leader through an individually delivered and intentional process that is supportive, nurturing, insightful and protective (Bey & Holmes, 1990).

Mentoring relationships can develop either informally or formally. Informal relationships develop through natural student interaction with faculty, staff, peers or others. Studies show that students who interact frequently with faculty and other university personnel are more satisfied with their collegiate experiences than those who do not "connect" with faculty and staff (Endo & Harpel, 1982). Such satisfaction has been experienced by individuals fortunate enough to develop a mentor relationship with someone who will guide their efforts at crucial points in their academic development.

Given the success of informal mentoring, formalized, institutional mentoring programs were developed to increase retention of students, academic performance, and satisfaction with the college experience. Often mentoring programs are designed for specific student populations such as low-income or minority students, honor students, student leaders, or students in specific majors. Many formal mentoring programs continue until the completion of the freshman year while others endure throughout a student's entire educational experience.

As the purpose of many mentoring programs is to improve student academic performance, it is surprising that many of these programs do not operate under academic divisions. Usually, mentoring programs are relegated to student affairs divisions or special services divisions. Many of these special services divisions provide acculturation to academic life to improve the campus climate, enhance the college experience, and increase the academic success of (a) first-generation college students trying to adapt to the life of a student, (b) students who must deal with differences between the cultures of home and college, (c) students who face severe financial burdens, (d) students who experience overt and subtle racism, and (e) students underprepared for taking responsibility for themselves and therefore vulnerable to uninformed decisions that carry negative consequences far into the future (Terrell, 1992).

Who are Successful Mentors?

Mentors in higher education are primarily faculty members, staff, and administration. Some mentoring programs utilize peers, such as students with junior or senior status, while others utilize community members, alumni or others. Mentors are generally recruited through volunteers or by a nomination process. Mentors and students may be matched by major, personal or professional interest, race, sex, or random assignment. While general opinion indicates that matching mentors and mentees by race is important in mentoring relationships, the

necessity of this match may be a myth that denies access of mentoring to the large minority student population (Kalbfleisch and Davies, 1991).

Mentor programs, whether formal or informal, require many attributes for mentors to be successful. Good characteristics for mentors include being interested, supportive, competent, sharing, unexploitive, positive in attitudes toward students and involved in research (Cronan-Hillix, et al. 1986). The most important of these characteristics are commitment, trust, and the willingness to invest time, energy, and self.

Successful mentors should also support issues of gender, race and class equity. In earlier research, Tinto asserts that successful student integration requires a disassociation of the student with communities of the past, including parents in order to persist in college.(Tierney, 1996) However, more recent schools of thought, such as postmodern, critical thought, and feminism, have drawn attention to the absence of diverse cultures and have questioned the validity of deconstructing students' cultural experiences in higher education arenas. Effective mentors should have an understanding of diversity issues and work to dissolve the borders of the dominant society that marginalize students. These mentors should protect high risk student individualism and culture rather than deconstructing the students through total assimilation into the dominant society.

What Constitutes Successful Mentoring?

One key to successful mentoring lies in the support and encouragement of university leaders (Krueger, 1992). Initially, universities can provide mentor training workshops, mentor handbooks, and intern training seminars that set expectations for the components of a positive mentor relationship. As the internship period progresses, university programs can emphasize the value of experiential learning through field supervision and reflective class discussions. Finally,

university programs can provide a setting that nurtures positive and productive relationships.

Successful mentoring on the university level integrates high risk students into the collegiate environment. Terenzini (1994) identified ways in which universities can accomplish student integration to foster achievement and persistence. These implications include:

1. Promoting awareness of the varying character of the transition process for different kinds of students;
2. Encouraging early validation of students' worth and performance;
3. Involving faculty members in new student orientation programs;
4. Orienting parents as well as students;
5. Interlocking character of students' in- and out-of-class experiences;
6. Providing institutional accommodation (student support programs); and
7. Showing the student that someone cares.

Coupled with mentoring, Terenzeni's implications could be accomplished more easily. Many higher education institutions are practicing the above objectives to some degree. In this paper, we focus on student support programs and their mentoring processes because we believe that these programs can successfully integrate high risk students into collegiate life.

Additionally, we feel that the formal institutional mentoring provided through high risk student support programs provides a consistent "network of mentoring". Krueger (1992) warns that in an informal mentoring situation, a mentor can always choose to back away quietly from the relationship. However, students in the student support programs in our study are generally mentored by more than one individual. Although the traditional definition of mentoring calls for one on one interaction, we believe that this process can be expanded to include "institutions of care", which provide a continuum of support tailored to the special needs of each individual

student.

Interviews

From the review of literature, we discovered that those who fit our description of high risk students have been identified through numerous studies. This research has been used by educational institutions to create programs that assist these students including the United States Department of Education's TRIO programs which encourage mentoring as a primary service component. Given that these programs are to provide assistance in the collegiate experience of students, we wanted to determine the extent to which these programs are providing mentoring and, if so, what the perceived benefits of that mentoring are.

Our research draws on open-ended interviews with 20 students who are/have been involved with StudentSupport Services, Veterans Upward Bound and Educational Opportunity Center at a southern, comprehensive four-year, regional university. Questions that we address in this study are: (a) Have our high risk students connected with any formal or informal mentors? (b) Were the students matched with formal mentors by race/gender, and did the students perceive race/gender to be an issue in their mentor relationships? and, (c) Did the mentoring have a positive effect on high risk students' persistence in higher education? We conclude the study with our interpretation as to how higher education administrators can clear a path for success through mentoring.

Have our high risk students connected with formal or informal mentors?

Our reasons for determining if our high risk students have received informal as well as formal mentoring were threefold:

1. We wanted to determine if the formal mentoring programs of the student services projects studied did, in fact, mentor their students.

2. Through our research, we wanted to either confirm or disprove our findings in the review of literature regarding high risk students and their lack of informal mentoring.
3. Where students were mentored both informally and formally, we wanted to analyze the benefits perceived while recognizing that we could not attribute success to one form of mentoring over another.

1. Were Students Mentored?

An in-depth study of these student support programs through reading the funded project proposals and regulatory statutes indicates that mentoring services are to be provided by the programs. Our study, through talking with program staff and interviews with project participants, validates that mentoring does occur in these programs. While the term mentoring may not be assigned by staff and/or student participants, these programs provide the fundamental services of mentoring as previously discussed in this piece. All students indicated that the student support staff provided them with a nurturing and supportive environment. As Eric* stated,

> [My counselor] basically did everything for me - forms that I had to fill out to get [financial] aid and get into school. I wouldn't have been able to do any of that without her. I felt like 'Uncle Jed' going to school. She would call and check up on me. . . She always encourages me. She has been fantastic, a tremendous asset. I know some people just do their eight hour a day job, but she seems like she does it from the heart.

Because of our traditional understanding of mentoring as represented through literature, our criteria for whether or not a student was mentored included a one-on-one bonding with an institutional staff or faculty member. However, as the interviews progressed, we were forced to

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*Names have been changed for confidentiality.

evaluate this criterion because most students were hesitant when we asked if they could identify one person as a mentor. The majority of students identified more than one staff member who provided supportive, nuturing, and insightful relationships. Therefore, we were forced to recognize that these students were assisted through a "network of mentoring."

Along with the counseling, tutoring, and institutional guidance that the high risk students obtained from the student programs, we found that, because of the deep commitment of the support personnel, students felt a greater sense of obligation to continue with their education. One student explained this: "It's kinda like part of your family and you don't want to let anybody down because they've helped you so much, so far that you want to just keep pushing..."

2. Did Informal Mentoring Relationships Develop with Faculty/Other Staff?

While the research asserts that the most beneficial informal mentoring occurs between students and faculty/staff within the students' discipline, most of the students in our study could not identify a strong informal faculty mentoring association. As Karen said,

> I haven't really [connected with a faculty mentor] because to me it seems that the professors or instructors seem very remote. They're just there to instruct you in a good scenario. . . it's not like you can look up to them for anything, it's like you're basically floating through class by yourself.

Most of those interviewed indicated that a mentor in their field of study would be most beneficial. Mark, one of the students studied, expressed in his definition of a mentor, "a good mentor is someone who cares about you and is familiar with the field that you major in." Another student commented:

> I don't have any mentor within my discipline. It would be helpful. I may use some of my instructors as mentors without there really being a mentor/mentee relationship. Being that I'm interested in Education, I've looked at what my instructors are trying to show me and I try to look beyond the immediate lesson and try to figure out how this fits into the overall scheme of education in general because I would hope that a lot of their good qualities would rub off on me and I would transfer that into my work.

While it is tragic that potentially helpful informal relationships did not develop for our high risk students, this circumstance indicates the need for formal mentoring programs.

3. Did Informal Mentoring Relationships Develop with Persons Outside the Institution?

In our study, the students identified several informal mentors outside of the institutional setting including: parents, siblings, spouses, pastors, and friends. Both Judy and Abby reinforced the idea that students with degreed parents have a strong support system which promotes college persistence. These parents act in a mentoring capacity by providing guidance and support to their children. Abby, a physically challenged student, stated that "my parents always believed in me even with my limitations. They supported me and suggested that I come here to school." Judy stated that her mother, who completed her degree while Judy began hers, acted as a role model. She said, "My mother went to college later in life. She inspired me. She accomplished it with two dependents. I don't think I could have done it."

Mark pointed to other mentors that impacted his college decisions including his pastor and a cousin who had completed a nursing program. Shane indicated his spouse as an inspiration for beginning and persisting in college. While these informal mentor relationships existed, it must be noted that Tinto suggests these relationships are often inadequate for higher education

success. However, we believe that "border-crossing" agendas (Giroux, 1993) can significantly benefit from these informal mentors.

Were the students matched with formal mentors by race/gender, and did the students perceive race/gender to be an issue?

The high risk students in this study were not matched with like gender or race mentors. Rather, mentors were assigned based on the individual needs of the student. Student responses do not support the idea that matching students by gender and/or race is necessary or even beneficial. Most of the students interviewed were mentored by one or more persons who did not match their race and/or gender. When queried about this, the respondents stated that race/gender did not significantly impact their mentoring experience. These students indicated that the concerned and caring attitude of the mentors towards their students worked to minimize differences. Charles succinctly demonstrated this by saying "Ms. Vanessa helped me and showed me through her actions that she cared."

Shane, who was also mentored by Ms. Vanessa went further to state, "all my life, [race] was a part of our society; it was something that was reflected on me." He then stated that "the caliber of people, like Ms. Vanessa - how can you say this 'black woman' - when there is a level above that racial junk. I do not identify Ms. Vanessa as being black, I identify her as being a professional." Apparently, the professional approach of this mentor disrupted Shane's previous ideas regarding minorities as demonstrated in the statement that "She is one of the very few persons in my life where that [race] has not even crossed my mind."

We believe that students do not strongly react to race and gender differences when mentoring services had a positive impact upon the student. As Mark said, "Race and gender did not matter in my case. I don't feel that it would matter as long as [the mentors] are there to move

me forward." However, it must be noted that all students interviewed were either positive or neutral regarding their mentoring experience. Further studies may indicate that negative experiences in mentoring may be correlated to race and/or gender issues.

One surprising comment regarding gender was made by Judy. She stated that with personal problems she preferred a female counselor and with administrative problems she preferred a male counselor. When queried about this, she replied that " Men have that male dominance thing. I think they would carry more clout to be totally honest." Judy exhibited surprising candor and understanding of institutionalized oppression of which many students are unaware. Her idea of matching a mentor's gender to task rather than to her own gender was quite interesting and demonstrates that today's students still encounter and are aware of subtle forms of racialized and gendered patterns of behavior or stereotypes.

Did mentoring have a positive effect on high risk students' persistence in higher education?

Having found that the students were being mentored through their programs, we wanted to determine if they perceived the benefits of the program. We discovered that two of the main services provided by the program that the students were involved in were tutoring and mentoring (initially identified by the students as counseling). The students spoke passionately about the mentoring that they were receiving, yet when asked if it was a key factor in their persistence in college, most were indecisive. Arnold (1993) asserts that institutionalized oppression and the effects of race, gender, and class are seldom central to the meanings students ascribe to their lives. Therefore failures are perceived to be wholly individual failures and successes as individual successes. Shane explained:

> I think the portion of the service I took most advantage of was the counseling that I received from Ms. Vanessa. Academic to personal to career goals. She was there to

> support me in any way. She's been very good. I am a family man. I have three children...You know it wasn't easy. So I think what helped and encouraged me and made it easier, was the fact that I had Ms. Vanessa.

However, when we asked Shane if he would identify Ms. Vanessa as a key mentor, he said:

> You know, my wife and I [were] talking about that - whether Ms. Vanessa existed or not, I would have continued... I have come to respect her greatly and love her as a person. She is genuinely interested in the student. She has the student interest at heart. I can't say that any one person would have been a mentor for me. Because I still would like to achieve this higher education. But, certainly by having people, key players, who have such a great ability to assist the student and has the image - someone you look up to - you respect their opinion. You look up to them as a person - because they have experience. They have schooling behind them. They have knowledge. They have been through the path you are trying to travel. And, I think in a way you could say it's a mentor. But, I wouldn't say.

The themes that we heard often from the students were that the support programs had offered help with tutoring, provided notetakers for class, helped out with other departments on campus, and counseled both for personal and academic reasons. In other words, by many definitions, these students are being mentored. Charles eloquently expressed his feelings about the assistance he received:

> It really does help because it takes a student and it gives you knowledge that you may never have had before or had a weak background in, and strengthens it and allows the student to progress on. It's more like training wheels. You put the wheels on so that you

can learn to ride. Eventually you learn to ride the bike and can take the training wheels off and be just like everyone else. That's what Student Support Services does.

The most poignant response regarding the value of formal mentoring overall, was from Eric, a recovering alcoholic, "My self-esteem was so low -- that someone would even want to help someone like me, it brings tears to your eyes, because you've been cast off all your life..."

Limitations

While our study offered significant insights into the values of formal mentoring programs, we recognize two weaknesses. First, the interviewees were identified by and referred to us by the individual programs. Therefore, the interviewees may have been selected based upon their likelihood of giving responses favorable to the programs. Also, because of the small sample size, this research is not generalizable to other populations.

We believe the above limitations would offer significant opportunities for additional studies. Further research could determine if successful mentoring can allow students, upon completion of a degree program, to negotiate those borders that may channel them into higher professional levels and accomplishments. Additional research could also assess the extent to which students, once successful, mentor other high risk students because of future realized benefits of their collegiate mentoring experiences.

Our Understandings of the Issues Raised by this Study

After careful review of existing literature and through this qualitative study, we have come to the following understandings:

1. Formal mentoring appears to have a positive impact upon student participation, retention, and success in higher education institutions;

2. Some high risk students who are mentored feel a greater sense of obligation to remain in school because of their perceptions of the deep commitment of support personnel:
3. Informal institutional mentoring, while proven to be beneficial, was absent from the college experience of the students we interviewed, thus indicating a need for formal mentoring programs;
4. Although literature suggests that mentors should be matched to mentees by race and/or gender, we found little evidence to substantiate this; and
5. Students were passionate about the mentoring that they received but made sense of it in a way that did not always acknowledge its potential overall value and importance in their collegiate success.
6. Although traditional mentoring relationships are defined and conceptualized as one on one experiences, our high risk students benefitted from all the components of mentoring, that were provided by a "network of mentors."

Until our society can eliminate oppressive hierarchies that result in high risk students, formal mentoring programs should be fostered and encouraged. We believe that this research can provide the educational community with powerful indices of the positive impact that formal mentoring relationships can have on high risk students' success and satisfaction in postsecondary education. This positive impact may manifest itself in: (a) increased student satisfaction within their program of study; (b) increased academic performance; and (c) increased motivation to persist in a program of postsecondary education.

We are also compelled by evidence that formal mentoring programs can successfully integrate marginalized individuals into the higher education community. These programs intervene by minimizing culture and power constraints which may act as barriers to high risk

students. While it is our contention that formal mentoring programs provide significant positive results, vital stakeholders including higher education administrators and faculty may not fully grasp their importance. Thus, adequate resources of funding and professional time may not be allocated in a way that will maximize student success.

We, as gatekeepers at the higher education crossroads, can use the results presented in this paper to direct high risk students on the road less traveled by members of their culture. Most importantly, we have discovered that high risk student guidance must be a continual process. We cannot just provide a key to entrance, and then expect high risk students to walk the strange, unfamiliar path alone. It is through our influence as higher education faculty and administrators that we can, *and should*, make "all the difference."

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